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ABSTRACT

Preventing dropouts is the main topic of the 12 publications reviewed in this annotated bibliography. A statistical analysis of dropouts in Portland, Oregon, revealed that the correlation by school was far greater than correlation by residential area. In another study, approximately 155 droputs were questioned and most believed that the school system had given up on them. Responses from 44 administrators of exemplary vocational education programs gave the highest rating for dropout prevention to students' self-concept development. Beck and Muia summarized the literature on dropouts and found the key factor to be the student's socioeconomic class. Programs that work in preventing dropouts are described in three publications. O'Connor studied 3 effective dropout programs and highlights 10 characteristics of effective programs, emphasizing such points as identifying potential dropouts earlier, and encouraging, rather than coercing, students to participate in special programs. Wehlage presents a set of guidelines for the marginal student. Mahood summarizes the cost to society of dropouts and recommends inschool suspension for disruptive students. The Sarasons report on an experiment in social skills training. Finally, a report summarizing the findings of a conference of high school administrators suggests that high school students be allowed the option of spreading their education over a longer period. (MLF)

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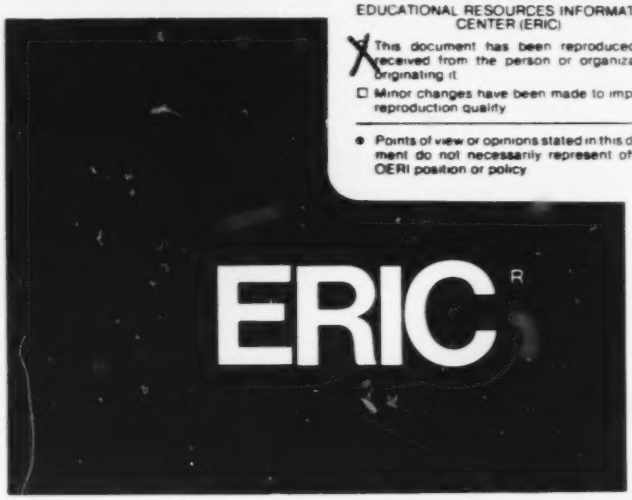

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Number 83, May 1986

The Best of ERIC presents annotations of ERIC literature on important topics in educational management.

The selections are intended to give educators easy access to the most significant and useful information available from ERIC. Because of space limitations, the items listed should be viewed as representative, rather than exhaustive, of literature meeting those criteria.

Materials were selected for inclusion from the ERIC catalogs *Resources in Education (RIE)* and *Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE)*.

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Preventing Dropouts

1 **Amenta, Robert**. "What's Happening in...Horizon High School?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, 64,3 (November 1982), pp. 204-05. EJ 271 203.

Horizon High School, in Bakersfield, California, was founded "to meet the needs of an ever-increasing number of students and parents who were not satisfied with the large, comprehensive high school." Horizon accepts students on a first-come, first-serve basis and receives no special funding. Yet this small (nine faculty, 180 students) alternative high school scores at or above the district average on state-mandated tests, and 80 percent of its graduates go on to some form of higher education.

How does Horizon do it? Part of the answer, according to Amenta, rests in Interact: "a daily period during which each teacher assumes guidance responsibilities for 15 to 20 students." Each student stays with the same Interact teacher for his or her entire career at Horizon—in effect, giving each student a special friend on the faculty.

In addition to Interact, Horizon offers extremely flexible course scheduling. Students enroll in courses of their own choosing through a registration procedure similar to that used by colleges and universities. The school offers minicourses ranging from backpacking to trips to the Los Angeles Metropolitan Art Museum. Finally, if a student is interested in a topic not covered by any course offering, he or she can pursue it through an individual study contract (if no one on the faculty has the expertise needed, the sponsoring teacher recruits someone from the community to help out).

The Horison staff, Amenta says, "meets success at every commencement exercise, when parents come forward—often with tears in their eyes—to say, 'Without you my child would not have made it'."

2 **Batsche, Catherine, and others**. *Indicators of Effective Programming for School to Work Transition Skills among Dropouts*. Normal, Illinois: Illinois State University, June 1984. 20 pages. ED 246 235.

What can educators do "to increase the retentive capacity of vocational programs among high school dropouts"? To find out what works and what doesn't, Batsche and her colleagues surveyed the administrators of seventy-six programs described as exemplary. Forty-four of those administrators replied.

The results of the survey were surprising. As expected, such work-specific and education-specific areas as "work experience, employability skills, basic academic skills, and job training skills" were rated as important. However, they were not rated as high as such "affective" areas as "self-concept development, work attitudes, interpersonal life skills, and motivation."

In a separate section of the survey, Batsche asked the administrators to rate twelve program factors. Not surprisingly, approachable teachers, clearly established rules, and clearly communicated performance standards rated very high. However, two factors that in other studies were rated very high by the students themselves—support from other students and financial aid—were rated very low by these administrators.

Batsche concludes by offering some recommendations based on the survey. Most important is her emphasis on a curriculum that includes activities designed to "help students enhance self-concept development, increase motivation, and refine daily living skills."

3 **Beck, Lisa, and Muia, Joseph A**. "A Portrait of a Tragedy: Research Findings on the Dropout." *High School Journal*, 64, 2 (November 1980), pp. 65-72. EJ 245 190.

Although almost six years have elapsed since this article first appeared, it remains one of the best short reviews of the dropout situation available. In clear, straightforward language, Beck and Muia summarize the literature then available on the subject, dispel some popular myths, and offer meaningful suggestions about dealing with the problem.

Traditionally, dropouts have been stereotyped as students who were mentally incapable of handling the demands of high school. Not so, according to Beck and Muia. They found that most dropouts were of average intellect, and "the stereotype of the dropout as an incapable, low-I.Q. juvenile is simply inaccurate."

Much more important, they say, is the student's socioeconomic class. "In brief, the heart of the problem is that the lower-class child is neither willing nor able to conform to the school's middle class standards of obedience, docility, and scholarship."

Perhaps of most value to the educator is Beck and Muia's comment on the importance of working with potential dropouts early. The "poor student who fails either of the first two grades has only a 20 percent chance of graduating." The authors quote Daniel Schreiber of the National Education Association: "Over the long haul, progress in the nursery and kindergarten areas will probably be most beneficial in preventing dropouts."

At the high school level, many dropout prevention measures

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involve changes in curriculum, such as designing occupational curriculum for "students whose aptitudes indicate that they are suited for unskilled labor." Teaching approaches can also be adapted: "potential dropouts are more likely to respond to a multimedia approach, for example, than to a dry lecture."

4 **Mahan, Guy, and Johnson, Charles**. "Portrait of a Dropout: Dealing with Academic, Social, and Emotional Problems." *NASSP Bulletin*, 67, 462 (April 1983), pp. 80-83. EJ 279 493.

To obtain information about why students drop out of high school, a task force formed by the Leyden Special Education Cooperative went straight to the source—the dropouts themselves. Approximately 155 dropouts were questioned about their high school experiences, their family backgrounds, and the circumstances in which they found themselves after dropping out of school. Mahan and Johnson summarize the results and offer suggestions about ways to reduce the dropout rate.

The task force found that most dropouts had serious personal problems that manifested themselves in difficulties at school and feelings of alienation from the school setting. They wanted to continue their education in some way, but were uncertain how to go about it. "Most had given up on the school system and believed that it had given up on them."

Recognizing that many school districts have limited resources, Mahan and Johnson offer a list of things that "could realistically be done to reduce the number of dropouts without radically changing the system or funding experimental programs." These include offering students better information about dealing with the school system, making alternative classes and work programs available, offering night classes, and contacting students after they have dropped out to let them know they can still return to school.

5 **Mahood, Wayne**. "Born Losers: School Dropouts and Pushouts." *NASSP Bulletin*, 65, 441 (January 1981), pp. 54-57. EJ 238 673.

In this appeal to educators to recognize the plight of high school dropouts and respond to it, Mahood argues on both humanitarian and practical grounds. First, he presents brief portraits of two teenagers: Frank and Willie. They play basketball on the same playgrounds. They enjoy the same social activities. And "each enjoys a fairly healthy set of career aspirations and what career education specialists label 'functional skills'." But Frank will almost certainly go on to graduate from high school, while Willie has already dropped out.

After arousing the reader's sympathy for Willie's plight, Mahood points out what the Willies of our society will cost us in terms of lost wages, taxes, and increased expenditure of tax dollars on welfare and unemployment benefits. Among other disturbing statistics, Mahood mentions that 71 billion dollars in state and federal taxes will be lost every decade simply because the Willies failed to complete high school.

Mahood points out a number of ways educators can help potential dropouts and "pushouts" (he believes many are pushed out of school rather than leaving because they want to). "Individualizing classes and caring for students" Mahood considers important because so many potential dropouts feel they are unwanted and not treated as individuals. Further, by allowing potential dropouts to achieve success in school, educators can help to correct these students' self-image as "born losers."

Mahood also recommends inschool suspensions for disruptive students (isolating them from the general student body but keeping them in the school setting) because such suspensions acknowledge the seriousness of the offenses committed at the same time that they maintain a link between the school and the offenders. Finally, educators should make the act of dropping out more difficult by—among other steps—requiring safeguards against withdrawal, such as "notification of parents, signed statements, hearings, if possible, and oral and written explanations of the students' rights to return voluntarily to school until age 21."

6 **Mann, Dale**. "Dropout Prevention—Getting Serious about Programs That Work." *NASSP Bulletin*, 70, 489 (April 1986), pp. 66-73. EJ number not yet assigned.

According to Mann, the big question educators need to ask themselves is "Do we really care about youths at risk?" Every year since 1958, "the dropout rate for pupils entering the fifth grade has been 25 percent." For blacks the dropout rate is 40 percent greater than for whites, and for Hispanics the rate is 250 percent higher. These and other figures, in Mann's view, point to schools' "willful decision not to teach all children."

Because young people drop out for a wide range of reasons, there are no simple dropout prevention solutions. Successful prevention programs, Mann states, "seem to have four Cs—cash, care, computers, and coalitions." If students are allowed to earn money through a work experience program, Mann warns that "there must be a link between learning and earning."

To demonstrate care or concern for at risk students, teachers should know the young people by name, ask about their lives, and assign, grade, and return homework. Consequently, "the institution cannot be very large and the pupil-teacher ratio has to be lower than typically found." One example of care is Atlanta's Community of Believers, which pairs low achieving youngsters with volunteers from the business community.

To identify young people as they become at risk of dropping out, schools can use computers to track such indicators as poor grades, truancy, retentions, discipline problems, paid employment, and family problems. Files of those at risk can then be given to a dropout prevention team.

Finally, schools can build coalitions of municipal agencies and businesses to meet needs that lie beyond the schools' resources.

7 **Mann, Dale**. *Report of the National Invitational Working Conference on Holding Power and Dropouts*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, March 1985. 55 pages. ED 257 927.

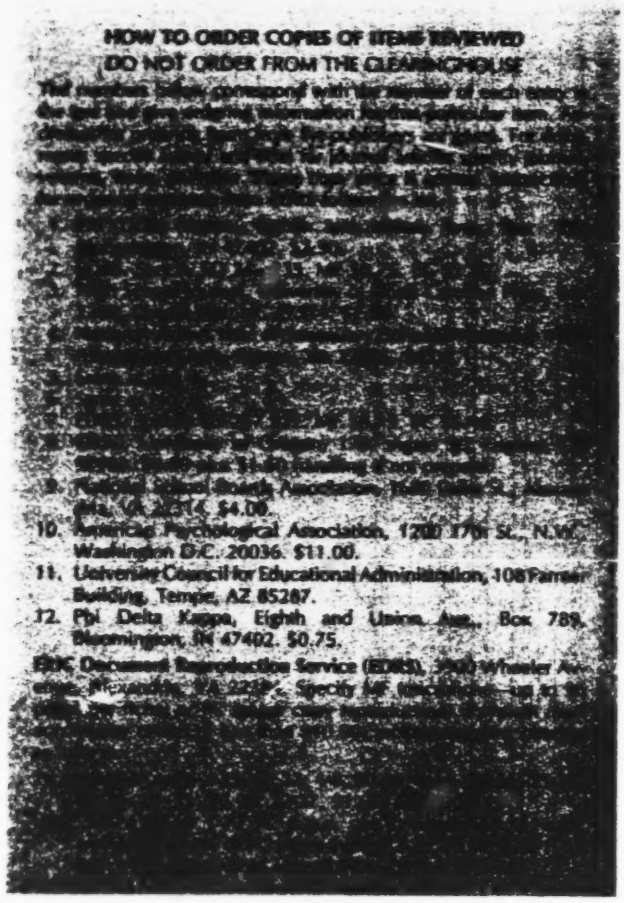
This report summarizes the findings of a conference of high school administrators from across the country. It includes as an appendix a paper, "Uncommon Sense: School Administrators, School Reforms, and Potential Dropouts," by Edward L. McDill, Gary Natriello, and Aaron M. Pallas. The conclusions of both the report and the paper are disturbingly clear.

First, the conference found that there was a woeful lack of reliable data on dropout rates and the efficacy of dropout programs. "The point is, we are not in a position even to ask, let alone answer, the question, 'what works?'"

Second, and equally dismaying, the conference found that even when it was possible to determine what needed to be done, it was by no means clear how to do it. "That teachers should care overtly and consistently for youth was a common theme," but "the place of caring was far more clear than how to get it where it does not exist, especially since many dropout programs are not the most sought after teaching assignments."

The paper by McDill, Natriello, and Pallas addresses the probable impact on dropouts of the current movement toward educational reform. The authors argue forcefully that the present trend toward requiring more academic subjects and more time in school, coupled with stiffer achievement standards, will lead to an increase in the dropout rate.

Among the authors' practical advice is the intriguing suggestion that high school students be allowed the option of spreading their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education over a longer period—in much the same way that many college students routinely take five years to complete a four-year program. Doing so would reduce the yearly courseload and enable many marginal students to meet demands that otherwise might be too much for them.

8 **O'Connor, Patrick**. "Dropout Prevention Programs That Work," *OSSC Bulletin*, 29, 4 (December 1985), 34 pages. ED number not yet assigned.

In Oregon, "over 30 percent of those entering the ninth grade will not finish high school. Nationally, about one out of every four students fails to complete high school." Motivated by those statistics, O'Connor sought to identify the characteristics of successful dropout prevention programs.

In his section on "Why Students Drop Out and How to Identify Them," O'Connor mentions two easy ways to identify potential dropouts—through poor grades and poor attendance records. He next highlights ten characteristics of effective programs, emphasizing such points as identifying potential dropouts early, carefully selecting staff who can effectively work with problem students, and encouraging students to participate in special programs voluntarily, rather than coercing them into participating.

Each of the programs O'Connor studied represents a particular community's response to its own specific dropout problems. The San Luis Valley Commission, formed by four small school districts in Colorado, emphasizes community involvement in identifying dropout problems and figuring out solutions. The Opportunity Center in Eugene, Oregon, is an alternative program for students who want to continue their educations but have "fallen through the cracks of the educational system." The Coca Cola Hispanic Education Fund in Los Angeles is an offshoot of the local school district's efforts to get private industry involved in the educational process. The fund supports special programs for potential dropouts at Garfield and Roosevelt high schools.

9 **Ross, Victor J**. "Find Potential Dropouts Early, Then Help Them Stay in School." *Executive Educator*, 5, 6 (June 1983), pp. 16-17. EJ 280 904.

No educator likes to see kids drop out of high school. At the same time, few school districts have the resources to develop elaborate and expensive programs for dropout prevention.

Ross reports on a low cost yet effective program developed by Gateway High School in Aurora, Colorado. Initially, volunteer teachers provided extra help for juniors and seniors who appeared ready to drop out of school. The program met with little success. The faculty at Gateway eventually realized that they "were offering too little, too late."

The solution developed at Gateway was to identify prospective dropouts before they entered high school and to pair them up with volunteer teachers before they even enrolled to start their freshman year.

The approach proved to be a success. In the first year of the program, out of thirty students in a control group (who were not enrolled in the EXPO program), seven dropped out of school. Out of the thirty students who were enrolled in the program, only one dropped out. Similar results have been reported for subsequent years.

Ross notes two keys to the program: Students are "invited to volunteer for the program (no one was to be coerced into participating)" and the students are not told they are considered potential dropouts. "EXPO is packaged and sold to students as special help from teachers and other staff members who recognize the special needs of certain kids."

10 **Sarason, Irwin G., and Sarason, Barbara R**. "Teaching Cognitive and Social Skills to High School Students." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 49, 6 (December 1981), pp. 908-18. EJ 254 789.

Every teacher has been faced with students who act before they think, who seem unable to ask questions in class, who skip class all too frequently and, in general, who exhibit behavior traits suggesting that they are high risk dropout candidates. But, as a practical matter, what can be done about such behavior?

The Sarasons report on an experiment in social skills training that may provide a partial answer to this question. The subjects of the experiment were "urban high school students" who "are low in academic skills and scholastic achievement, have poor school attendance records, and are likely to come to the attention of school authorities for disciplinary infractions."

The experiment was carried out over a thirteen-class health course sequence in "Decision Making." One group of subjects watched live models act out various scenarios with which the students would be familiar, such as deciding whether or not to cut class and asking for help on the job. The models would demonstrate specific behavior patterns and cognitive skills. After witnessing the models act out the situation, the subjects would discuss what they had seen and then act out similar scenarios. Another group of subjects went through the same process, except that they observed videotapes instead of live models. A third group functioned as a control.

At the end of the year following the experiment, the absences, tardinesses, and behavior referrals of members of the three groups were tabulated and compared. Those students who had watched live models did much better than those who had observed videotapes, and these in turn did somewhat better than members of the control group.

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Although the Sarasons' experiment was conducted on too small a scale to be conclusive, the results do suggest that the use of live models and/or videotapes to demonstrate behavior patterns and cognitive skills is an avenue worth pursuing.

11 **Sexton, Porter W.** "Trying to Make It Real Compared to What? Implications of High School Dropout Statistics." *Journal of Educational Equity and Leadership*, 5, 2 (Summer 1985), pp. 92-106. EJ 319 444.

Given that study after study have emphasized the effect that the home environment has on dropout rates, educators may well wonder whether anything that the schools can do will make any difference. To find out, Sexton conducted a statistical analysis of dropout rates in Portland, Oregon.

Sexton broke down dropout rates by school and by residential area. He found that the correlation by school was far greater than the correlation by residential area—suggesting that the school setting may exert a greater influence on dropout rates than do such factors as home environment and the economic status of students.

Of particular interest are Sexton's findings concerning the fates of students who were transferred to schools in adjoining neighborhoods after the schools in their original neighborhoods were shut down. After the 1980-81 school year, schools K and L— which happened to have the highest dropout rates in the district—were shut down and their students were transferred to schools E, F, and G, which had substantially lower dropout rates.

If the home environment was the primary factor in determining a student's chances of dropping out, we would expect the dropout rate for the neighborhoods originally served by schools K and L to remain high after the students from those neighborhoods were transferred to schools E, F, and G. Instead, the dropout rate for those neighborhoods was cut in half (365 students dropped out from those neighborhoods in the last year they were served by schools K and L; only 152 dropped out in the first year they were served by schools E, F, and G).

What Sexton found was that the dropout rate among the transfers fell to that of the student body as a whole in the new schools. In short, among those students surveyed, the dropout rate depended far more on the school attended than on the student's socioeconomic status and home environment.

Sexton's findings should greatly strengthen the position of those educators who argue that the school can, in fact, make a difference in the dropout rate.

12 **Wehlage, Gary G.** *Effective Programs for the Marginal High School Student.* Fastback 197. Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1983. 45 pages. ED 235 132.

Who are the marginal students? Most researchers attempt to answer this question by citing reams of statistical data. Wehlage opts for a different approach. He invites the reader to join him in a visit to the Hut—a drugstore, located near an urban high school, that is frequented by dropouts and potential dropouts. The "Hutters" tell Wehlage about their perceptions of school, their ideas about themselves, and their plans for the future.

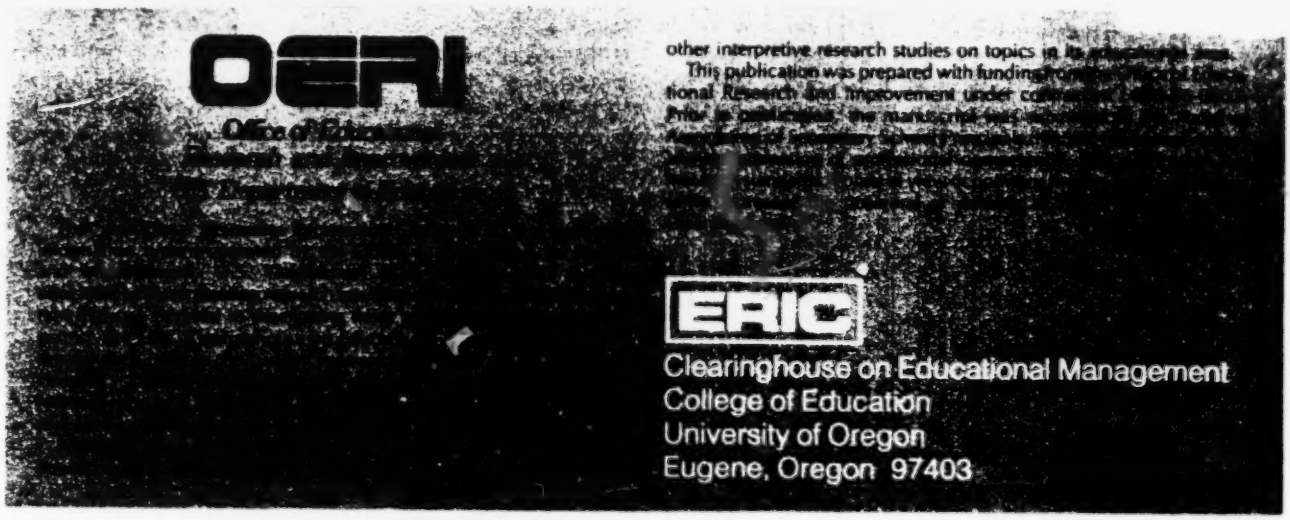
For the most part, the picture of the marginal student that emerges is what most educators would expect—typically, these individuals exhibit poor academic skills and have high truancy rates. Contrary to the findings of many other researchers, however, Wehlage discovered that these particular marginal students did not present themselves as suffering from low feelings of self-esteem. Rather, they pictured themselves as feeling superior to those students who had elected to work within the system as represented by school.

Wehlage also found that some teachers displayed thinly veiled dislike and even contempt for the Hutters. For example, one teacher was observed by an interviewer to demand that a Hutter sit by himself at the back of the room—before he even had a chance to do anything wrong. Such behavior on the part of the teacher might very well reinforce the potential dropout's dislike of school.

Wehlage moves from his discussion of the Hutters to a set of guidelines for developing effective programs for the marginal student—cautioning that programs that emphasize remedial skills and vocational training while ignoring the need to develop abstract thinking ability will meet with limited success. He then describes six programs from around the country that have been designed to deal with the marginal student.

In discussing characteristics of an effective program, Wehlage emphasizes the value of what he calls the "experiential curriculum." Placing students in "roles different from their customary one," this curriculum includes such activities as "community service career internships, political/social action, community study, and outdoor adventure."

Wehlage concludes with a list of nine practical tips for educators who are planning programs for the marginal student.



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